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Helms Believes He Informed Johnson of CIA's Mail-Opening Project in 1967

From Times Wire Services.

WASHINGTON—Former Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard M. Helms said Wednesday that he believed he told former President Lyndon B. Johnson about the CIA's secret mail-opening project in 1967, some six years before it was abandoned.

Testifying before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, Helms said he did not know whether any other President had been notified during the mail intercept's 20-year history, but emphasized that he could not rule it out.

Helms also disagreed with former Postmasters General Edward Day and Winton Blount, who testified earlier that the CIA never told them it was opening one of every 13 letters to and from the Soviet Union.

The illegal mail interceptions involving correspondence to and from the Soviet Union began in 1953. Nearly 216,000 letters were opened before the program was halted in early 1973 out of fears of disclosure.

Helms' testimony was the first indication that any President had been informed of the project.

Helms, who is now ambassador to Iran, said he believed he mentioned

the program to Johnson at a private meeting in the spring or 1967 at which they also discussed other intelligence matters.

"I have no record of this," Helms told the committee. "I can only tell you it was a belief I had."

Helms was not asked by the committee what Johnson's reaction was. The former CIA director told reporters during a break that "if" his memory was correct, he believed Johnson "shrugged" and at least implicitly gave the project his approval.

Earlier, both Blount and Day had testified they believed it might be legal for the CIA to open and read the mail of U.S. citizens.

However another former postmaster general, John Gronouski, said he believed such openings were against the law. He said the only reason he did not stop the operation when he was in office was that he was never told it existed.

In testimony under oath, Day, Blount and Gronouski gave these stories:

—Day said that when Allan Dulles told him he wanted to brief him on a highly secret matter he said he did not want to know any secrets because he might be blamed if they leaked. Day said he could not recall if

he was actually told the CIA was opening the mail but believed that he was not.

—Blount, postmaster general for part of the Richard M. Nixon administration said he was told that two postal employees intercepted the Soviet-U.S. mail and gave it to CIA agents who held it overnight. But he said he never asked for specifics and did not know the mail was being opened.

—Gronouski, postmaster general in the Johnson administration, said no one inside the CIA ever tried to tell him of the mail opening program.

At one point Day said, "I'm not at all sure it was illegal for them to open the mail . . . the CIA had over-all powers that put them in a different situation from other people."

Blount said: "I didn't understand at that time that what the CIA was doing was illegal, and I don't understand that now . . . as far as I know, the CIA operated under the laws of the land."

"If I had had an inkling the CIA was holding, opening or delaying the mail, I would have put a stop to it," Gronouski said.

Federal laws forbid opening first class U.S. mail without a search warrant.